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SUBJECT: AF/E Director Knight Visit to the Comoros

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: AF/E Director Knight advocated for transparency and reconciliation with GOC interlocutors during his visit to the Comoros November 22-25. Director Knight also followed up on "Bilateral Commission" items from the September 18 meetings in Washington. END SUMMARY.

Our Dreams Become Hope

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¶2. (SBU) GOC Foreign Minister Jaffar welcomed AF/E Director Knight to the Comoros, noting he appreciated "strong signals of friendship" from the United States in posting an officer in Moroni and planning to reopen the U.S. diplomatic mission in 2009. These initiatives, USAID and CJTF-HOA work in the Comoros, and the prospects for Peace Corps' return were reassuring, "our dreams become hope" Jaffar said.

¶3. (SBU) AF/E Director Knight emphasized Comoros was important to the United States and said he would work toward the ambitious goals of increased partnership the FM outlined. He added that transparency and reconciliation in the Comoros were vital to stability. FM Jaffar repeated the GOC message that they had kept their promise to the international community to attempt to hold an inter-Comoran dialogue. He reiterated the assessment that Comoran constitutional provisions did not work and if the "opposition" refused to talk, then President Sambi had the authority to hold a referendum. FM Jaffar concluded by asserting the Constitution gave President Sambi the authority to "take action when the national interest was at stake," but reassuring he had no intention of remaining in power indefinitely.

Bilateral Commission Priorities

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¶4. (SBU) The GOC took advantage of Director Knight's visit to the Comoros to follow up on items from the September 18 "Bilateral Commission" meeting in Washington. GOC officials from the Presidency, Foreign Ministry, and Finance Ministry were present as was (significantly) Comoran Ambassador to the United States Toihiri, who came back for this purpose. The Comorans (most of whom comprised the delegation to Washington) expressed gratitude for continued USG working-level engagement and were reassured that Director Knight would remain in the Bureau through the transition to advocate for Comoros priorities.

¶5. (SBU) The GOC are working through a list of 30 action items from the meeting in September, focusing in the short term on maintaining and building USG contacts. The Planning Commissioner said the GOC was very interested in the "Global Partnership" for food security and offered to provide feedback for this initiative. Additional priorities for the Comorans were clean water, the upcoming IMF decision on the Emergency Post Conflict Assistance, and reestablishing relations with the World Bank. Our Comoran colleagues welcomed news that progress was being made to reopen the U.S. diplomatic mission to Moroni in 2009 and hopeful that a positive decision on reopening the Peace Corps could be reached early in the new administration.

Three Ministers

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¶6. (SBU) Again demonstrating the importance the Comorans assigned to the visit, the Minister of Finance was unexpectedly joined by two colleagues in our meeting; the Minister of Land Management and Minister of Institutional Reform. Director Knight took the opportunity of an audience with three cabinet members to reiterate his message about transparency and reconciliation being crucial to stability. Our GOC counterparts took this message on board, with the Finance Minister speaking first to say his top priority was qualifying for the emergency IMF program to work toward debt relief. He averred that only economic development will preserve stability in the long run. Director Knight replied that we would seek to support the Comoros at the IMF meeting December 15 if possible; he noted that in addition to our USAID education program, we also have a USAID microfinance project that will accompany the Comoros in extending credit for development.

¶7. The Minister of Land Management noted Comoran infrastructure challenges, including roads and housing, which are crucial to poverty reduction. The Minister of Institutional Reform emphasized the constitution was a major obstacle to Comoros' development; thus, President Sambi would hold a referendum asking the people to assign necessary authority ("competencies") to the Union government so that it could accomplish its development objectives.

¶8. (U) AF/E Director Knight cleared this message.

MARQUARDT